

Crewmen say CIA aided contra airlift

By Thomas Palmer
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In spite of strict orders against such contacts, CIA officials in Honduras assisted pilots in the ostensibly private operation that airdropped arms to Nicaraguan rebels in 1986, according to crewmen involved in the effort.

The crewmen told the Globe that pilots were allowed access to limited amounts of CIA logistical information to help them avoid Nicaraguan antiaircraft fire, in apparent violation of CIA policy and possibly in contravention of US law.

The only previously reported CIA field assistance in the airdropping of weapons to the contras occurred during the congressional ban on such assistance, in 1985 and 1986. That involved Tomas Castillo, the former CIA station chief in Costa Rica, who was forced to retire once his involvement became known.

The US ambassador in Honduras, who oversaw official CIA activities there, said yesterday that information about last year's reported contra supply effort was kept from him.

"It puzzles me why I didn't

hear," said John A. Ferch, ambassador from August 1985 through July of 1986, who was reached by telephone at Brown University, where he is a diplomat-in-residence this year.

CIA officers were formally assigned to the contra rebel base at Aguacate and elsewhere in Honduras to exchange intelligence information with the rebels operating out of Honduras, a knowledgeable source said. They shared data on the location of Sandinista forces, but they were prohibited from providing military assistance except communications and certain advice, according to a law passed in December 1985.

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Any CIA logistical assistance to the contra arms airlift would have violated the law, according to an interpretation by the CIA inspector general in the case of Castillo. CIA spokeswoman Sharon Fos-

ter, asked about the crewmen's accounts of receiving CIA help, said, "The agency did not send arms to the contras and was not participating in that."

Although the Reagan administration portrayed the supply operation as a private effort in the weeks following Nicaragua's downing of a cargo plane last October, this story has unraveled.

The Tower Commission report says that former National Security Council aide Oliver L. North was deeply involved in the effort and was assisted by Castillo and Lewis A. Tambs, the former ambassador to Costa Rica.

The Globe reported last month that crewmen signed secrecy agreements that warned them of prosecution under US espionage laws if they revealed classified information.

Castillo reportedly told the Tower Commission that he thought he was allowed to coordinate the delivery of supplies, including weapons. Messages between Castillo and North cited in the report show that he aided deliveries.

"I could not plan or engage in any military operation inside Nicaragua," Castillo told the commission. "But I could provide information that would allow the safe delivery of material to the people inside; I could pass information concerning potential deliveries to supply them, but not for any specific military operation."

In a December opinion on the Castillo case, which apparently was considerably larger than the Honduras operation, a CIA lawyer found that contacts with the supply operation, "although contrary to policy, were not contrary to law," the Tower Commission said. The lawyer reportedly concluded that Sandinista antiaircraft positions and other information needed to carry out an airlift safely fell within the range of "advice" permitted under the law.

A month later, however, the CIA's inspector general disagreed, finding that Castillo's activities "could be characterized as planning for a paramilitary operation,

expressly barred" under the law, according to the commission report.

Citing news reports, the crewmen who helped supply the anti-Sandinista rebels said Castillo was involved with airdrops to rebels based in southern Nicaragua. The flights out of Aguacate in Honduras, they stressed, were for rebels in northern Nicaragua.

There is no evidence that CIA officers coordinated the Honduran airdrops as openly as Castillo aided flights from Costa Rica, the crewmen said.

Under orders

The crewmen said the two CIA officers who gave them intelligence at Aguacate apparently were under orders to stay away from their operation.

"You understand that we don't know that you exist," David Johnson, a pilot, said he was told by one CIA officer. "If you get into any trouble, we can't go in after you."

Another pilot, who asked not to be identified, said he approached the CIA officers to see "if there was any way to set up a rescue plan" in case a plane went down. He was rebuffed.

Nevertheless, the two CIA officers at Aguacate - known only as Mick and Moe - made available intelligence on Sandinista troop and antiaircraft positions inside Nicaragua, according to the crewmen.

They said that Mick and Moe had what one crewman called a "situation map" showing Sandinista positions in Nicaragua.

According to several sources, the CIA routinely exchanged military intelligence with rebel leaders at Aguacate. The CIA map, about 5 feet square and located in the officers' primitive quarters, had no formal connection to the supply operation, the crewmen said. More detailed than a chart normally used by pilots, it showed where guns were positioned along the border, and one pilot said he thought it existed primarily to assist contra leaders battling the Sandinistas.

"This was not something they were doing for us or with us," one crewman said.

"These guys had a personal heartfelt interest in our safety," he said. "But their restrictions kept them from doing more."

However, in the small rebel base, the crewmen got to know the two CIA officers, who they said allowed them to look at the map after some initial reluctance.

"We did not achieve that 'glance approval' until after several weeks of close proximity," one crewman said.

There was particular concern last summer about a line of Sandinista antiaircraft positions running across Nicaragua from Managua east to the Atlantic Coast town of Bluefields, the crewmen said.

Map changed

One source said the map was changed several times.

Last October, Eugene Hasenfus was captured in Nicaragua after parachuting out of a C-123 cargo plane delivering supplies to the contras. He was convicted on terrorism charges and was later released.

The crewmen also said that helicopters with links to the CIA regularly left and arrived at Aguacate. From the crewmen's accounts, the helicopter missions raise more questions about CIA activities and contacts with the suppliers of the rebels.

Iain Crawford, who rigged parachutes for the airdrops, said that while he was at Aguacate early last spring helicopters came and went several times a week.

Crawford said that the CIA officer known as Mick once gave him permission to ride aboard a helicopter to the Nicaragua-Honduras border. Crawford said that this helicopter was delivering plastic explosives to a contra position near the border. He said he did not know if this was a unique delivery or part of a routine.

Another crewman said CIA helicopters often traveled to the border area. On one occasion, the crewman said he flew fuel to the border at the request of a CIA officer. The fuel was for helicopters operating near the border. The crewman, one of those who asked that his name not be used, said he did not know the nature of the CIA's border operation.

Although some unauthorized assistance was provided to the supply operation, some CIA officials apparently went to great lengths to abide by their instructions, according to one crewman.

When the crewman spotted an old friend from the CIA in a plane taxiing in at Ilopango air base in El Salvador he expected the man to walk over and greet him.

"But he didn't come over," the crewman said. The former friend walked right past him without a word.

Freelance writer Jeff McConnell contributed to this report.